

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES SECTION ON ARCHIVES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Impact of Mental Health Challenges on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Young People

Submission by the Section on Archives and Human Rights (SAHR)
of the International Council on Archives (ICA)

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Preamble

The International Council on Archives [ICA], an international association created in 1948 to promote the development of archives, with advisory status to UNESCO in the field of archives and documentary heritage, commends the call for input on ***The Impact of Mental Health Challenges on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Young People*** [<https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-impact-mental-health-challenges-enjoyment-human-rights-young>]

Supporting this initiative, the International Council on Archives, informed by the work of its Section on Archives and Human Rights [SAHR], is pleased to share experiences and recommendations that relate to archives in this context.

1. About SAHR (ICA)

Within the International Council on Archives (ICA) the Section on Archives and Human Rights (SAHR) promotes the role of archives in protecting, promoting and ensuring accountability for human rights, including access to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. SAHR engages with issues related to memory, documentation, access to information and the ethical management of sensitive records, particularly in contexts affecting vulnerable groups, including children and young people. In this context SAHR proposes an input to this call based on 5 themes.

2. Theme 1: Relevance of archives and recordkeeping to youth mental health and human rights

Mental health challenges among young people (particularly anxiety, depression, trauma and distress linked to violence, discrimination, displacement, institutionalisation or suppression of

identity) are closely connected **to broader human rights concerns**. Access to information, recognition, participation in decision-making and accountability for harm are all essential to both mental well-being and the enjoyment of human rights. Archives and records play a crucial yet often overlooked role in:

- ✓ Recognising young people's lived experiences
- ✓ Supporting identity formation and dignity
- ✓ Enabling access to remedies and services
- ✓ Preventing re-victimisation through institutional neglect or erasure

When records are missing, inaccessible, destroyed or misused, young people may experience continued harm, exclusion or denial of their rights, with significant mental health consequences.

3. Theme 2: Impact of recordkeeping failures on young people's mental health

3.1. Loss of identity and belonging

Young people who grow up in alternative care systems, migration contexts, conflict situations or under restrictive state systems are often dependent on records to understand their personal history, family relationships and identity. Inadequate recordkeeping or restricted access can lead to:

- ✓ Feelings of invisibility and disempowerment
- ✓ Identity confusion and distress
- ✓ Long-term emotional and psychological harm

For many young care leavers, adopted children or children of disappeared persons, access to personal records is fundamental to mental well-being and the realization of the right to identity.

3.2. Barriers to Justice and Accountability

Young people who experience violations such as abuse, discrimination or unlawful detention will rely on institutional records to seek justice or reparations. When records are withheld, altered or destroyed, this can:

- ✓ Prevent access to effective remedies
- ✓ Reinforce trauma and mistrust in institutions
- ✓ Undermine the right to be heard

The absence of reliable records can itself constitute a form of re-victimisation with serious mental health implications.

4. Theme 3: Archives as tools for protection, empowerment and healing

4.1. Access to information as a protective factor

The right of access to information, including personal and administrative records, supports young people's:

- ✓ Autonomy and agency
- ✓ Capacity to participate in decisions affecting them

- ✓ Ability to understand and navigate systems that shape their lives

Rights-based archival access policies, especially those designed with youth participation, can significantly reduce feelings of helplessness and exclusion.

4.2. Memory, acknowledgement and collective healing

Archives play an important role in documenting human rights violations, social movements and experiences of marginalised youth. Inclusive and participatory archival practices can:

- ✓ Validate young people's experiences
- ✓ Counter denial, stigma or institutional silence
- ✓ Support collective and intergenerational healing

For young people affected by conflict, systemic discrimination or social injustice, recognition in the historical record can be an important step toward dignity and psychological recovery.

5. Theme 4: Risks: Privacy, stigma, and ethical challenges

SAHR also emphasises that poorly managed records can harm young people's mental health if they:

- ✓ Expose sensitive mental health information without consent
- ✓ Enable surveillance, discrimination or stigma
- ✓ Are shared without adequate safeguards or context

Human rights-based recordkeeping requires strong ethical standards, trauma-informed access practices and respect for the evolving capacities of young people.

Practically, this means that in the management of files with sensitive information, protection must be provided even in cases where companies are contracted to process and/or store information related to the health of young people, during document management: generation of new electronic documents, physical storage of documents, cloud storage, among others. (Reference is made to what was discussed in another publication on the topic in *Comma* <https://doi.org/10.3828/comma.2020.7>)

6. Theme 5: Recommendations to states and institutions

SAHR respectfully recommends that States, in addressing youth mental health and human rights, should:

- ✓ Integrate recordkeeping and archival considerations into mental health, child protection, education, justice and social care systems.
- ✓ Guarantee young people's right of access to their personal records, with appropriate support, clear procedures and safeguards.
- ✓ Preserve records related to human rights violations affecting young people as part of accountability, truth-seeking and prevention efforts.

- ✓ Adopt trauma-informed and youth-sensitive archival practices, including culturally appropriate and participatory approaches.
- ✓ Ensure privacy, data protection and informed consent, particularly regarding mental health data and digital records.
- ✓ Support archives and records professionals through training on human rights, mental health awareness and ethical access.
- ✓ Include young people in policy design related to information governance, memory and access to records that affect them.

In respect of children who have been adopted or placed in care,

- ✓ Reference should be made to the ICA SAHR document *Guidance on Access to Childhood Records: access rights of adults to documents relating to their own childhood experience of adoption or being in care*. See <https://www.ica.org/resource/guidance-on-access-to-childhood-records-access-rights-of-adults-to-documents-relating-to-their-own-childhood-experience-of-adoption-or-being-in-care>

7. Conclusion

Mental health challenges among young people cannot be fully addressed without attention to the informational and institutional environments that shape their lives. Archives and records are not neutral repositories; they are powerful human rights instruments that can either deepen harm or support healing, dignity and empowerment. The Section on Archives and Human Rights of the International Council on Archives is convinced that recordkeeping and archival systems contribute positively to the mental health and human rights of young people.